Foreign Aid Fables: Don't Shortchange American Security

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As Secretaries of Defense and State, we work daily to combine the tools of force and diplomacy in order to protect the security and advance the interests of the American people.

In that spirit, we urge Congress to reconsider its shortsighted proposal to cut more than $2 billion from President Clinton's proposed Fiscal Year 2000 budget for foreign affairs.

Such a cutback reflects a profound misunderstanding about the world and America's place in it that our nation can ill afford. Although the United States is strong and prosperous, grave dangers remain. These include terrorists who target Americans, potentially explosive conflicts in key regions, international crime and drug trafficking, and the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the missiles that deliver them.

To counter these and other threats, our armed forces must remain the best-led, best-trained and best-equipped in the world. As President Clinton and our military leaders assure, they will be.

But we also need first class diplomacy. Because on many occasions, we will rely on diplomacy as our first line of defense – to cement alliances, build coalitions, and find ways to protect our interests without putting our fighting men and women at risk.

Unfortunately, in recent years, resources have lagged behind responsibilities. Today, we allocate less than one-tenth of the portion of our GDP that we did a generation ago to support overseas democracy and growth. In this respect, among industrialized nations, we rank dead last. At the same time, we are the largest debtor to the United Nations.

The Congressional cutbacks reflect two basic misunderstandings about the size and purpose of our international programs.

First, although most Americans think it is far more, the truth is that only one penny out of every dollar the federal government spends is used for foreign affairs programs. And these programs are cost-effective, because a conflict prevented, or a disaster avoided, spares large amounts in future costs for modest investments now.

Second, we have demonstrated that what is traditionally called foreign aid is, in truth, aid to America. For example, when we provide resources to dismantle nuclear weapons in the former Soviet Union, or prevent cocaine from reaching American shores, or train foreign police in counter-terrorism, we are aiding America.

When we undertake diplomatic initiatives designed to curtail North Korea's nuclear weapons and advanced missile programs, we help protect American security, including the 37,000 U.S. troops now serving on the Korean Peninsula.

And when we help nations in troubled parts of the world make a transition from war to peace, or from tyranny to democracy, we advance our interests and make the job of our armed forces easier. The best exit strategy for a place like Kosovo, for example, is to assist the people there in assuming responsibility for their own well-being.

Taken together, our international programs help make our citizens safer, our economy stronger, our world more stable and our freedoms more secure.

The budget debate in Washington revolves around real issues that relate to the role of the federal government in such matters as education and health care. But the protection of national security is one of our government's most basic tasks.

It is a centerpiece of our Constitution and why our country first came together. It is the solemn responsibility of the executive and legislative branches in Washington, each according to its role.

The best leaders of both parties in Congress understand this. They know that American diplomacy belongs on the short list of budget priorities. And that this should be fully reflected in the outcome of negotiations between the Administration and Congress on the final shape of this year's budget and for years to come.